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ABSTRACT

Classroom techniques are suggested for teaching English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) students cognitive and academic skills needed for academic success, using the reading and analysis of folk tales. Skills targeted include comparing and contrasting, evaluating ideas, supporting claims with facts and evidence, organizing and grouping ideas, and using inference appropriately. A comparison and contrasting exercise using two variations of a folk tale is described. An activity focusing on techniques for supporting and evaluating ideas is intended for use after students have read a number of unrelated folk tales. An exercise in evaluating and summarizing ideas uses a single tale. In each case, preparatory activities for the teacher, detailed in-class procedures, and suggested variations for more advanced students are described. Some suggestions are also made for following story reading with questions that promote inferencing. (MSE)

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Using Folktales to Teach Cognitive/Academic Skills

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Using Folktales to Teach Cognitive/Academic Skills

When students leave their ESL classes behind, they are often expected to compete academically with native speakers, doing work for teachers that know little or nothing about ESL. They are expected to write papers and answer essay questions, and their academic success usually depends on how well they do so. It thus falls to the ESL teacher, in addition to teaching language, to help students understand the questions they must continually be raising in their academic work and to develop the thinking skills they need to succeed. Necessary academic skills include:

Comparing and Contrasting: How are ideas the same and how are they different? (This is the basis for many academic papers and test questions.)

Evaluating: How important is each idea? (This is essential in deciding what to include in a paper or presentation, in drawing conclusions, and in writing summaries.)

Supporting: What facts or evidence show that my claims are true? Why do I think this? (Students often make accurate statements but fail to support them.)

Organizing/Grouping: How are different ideas connected to each other?

Inferencing: What is implied that is not directly stated?

The literary and extra-literary characteristics of folktales make them relatively easy to grasp. Because of this, they are ideal for introducing new skills and strategies; since less energy is required for decoding the text, more energy is available for focusing on the academic skills. And the readily available variants of many common folktales, and many unrelated tales that address related themes, make folktales ideal for analytical activities that involve the academic skills mentioned above.

A Comparison/Contrast Activity Comparing Variants of a Tale

Preparation

1) Select two or more variants of a tale with important differences.

2) If students are at significantly different levels, rewrite the tales so that there is one story for each level of student. For example,the telling of the *Turtle and the Rabbit* that follows is shorter and simpler than *The Whale and the Sea Slug*. The first is for lower level students and the second for higher level students. This keeps both groups working at an appropriate level while still letting them share a common task, and it also lets them finish at about the same time (if you judge the difficulty well).

3) Make copies so each student will get one tale.

4) If appropriate, prepare some graphic organizer that guides students to key differences.

In the Classroom

1) Give out one story to each student and have students read them. (If your stories are told at different levels, make sure that each student gets one at the right level.) Provide help as needed so students understand their stories well enough to retell them without the written version.

2) In groups of two or three, each student should orally tell his/her story to the rest of the group. Students should be grouped so each member of the group has read a different story. Don't let students use the written versions at this point or they will just try to read them aloud.

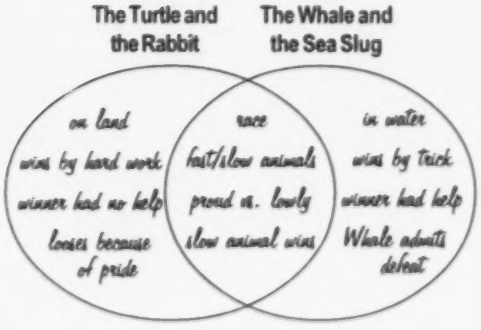
3) Students should then talk about the stories and identify as many similarities and differences as possible. You may want to specify a minimum number of similarities and differences for them to find. A chart like the one below can point lower-level students toward important differences:

	The Turtle and the Rabbit	The Whale and the Sea Slug
What was the story about?		
Where was the race?		
Why did one animal ask the other to race?		
Describe the stronger animal's attitude?		
Who won?		
How did he win?		
What help did the winner have?		

In the multilevel classroom, you could provide this support to lower level students to help them with the task while letting higher level students do the activity without any support.

4) Have one student tell each story to the class. It must be a student who did NOT read the story. Other students who did not read the story should listen for accuracy. (Only have students who read the story help if there are significant points missing.)

5) Review similarities and differences as class, listing all of them on the board. At different times, demonstrate different ways to visually represent these findings. Charts and Venn diagrams are useful for showing similarities and differences.



	The Turtle and the Rabbit	The Whale and the Sea Slug
Similarities	race fast vs. slow proud vs. lowly slow animal wins	race fast vs. slow proud vs. lowly slow animal wins
Differences	on land Rabbit asked others to race Rabbit asks out of pride one race wins by hard work winner had no help looses because of pride	in water no mention of other challenges Whale asks out of anger repeated races wins by trick winner had help Whale admits defeat

6) Have students rate (i.e., evaluate) **the importance of the differences.** You can have students rank the differences, group them, or place them on a continuum; see the activities that follow for more on this. This can be done individually, with the whole class, or in small groups. If you

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The Turtle and the Rabbit

Once the rabbit said that he was faster than any other animal. The rabbit was always asking other animals to race with him. One day, he asked the turtle to race. He was surprised when the turtle said, "Yes." They set a day for the race.

When the day of the race came, the rabbit and the turtle met. The other animals came to watch. The race began, and the rabbit was soon out of sight. The turtle, not discouraged by this, just slowly walked along.

Soon the rabbit could see the finish line. He wanted to wait for the rest of the animals to come so they could watch him win. So, he sat under a tree to wait. With the warm sunshine, and the pleasant breeze, and the buzzing of the bees, the rabbit was soon asleep.

Several hours later the rabbit woke up. He heard cheering in the distance and saw the turtle close to the finish line. He jumped up and ran toward the finish line, still hoping to win, but the turtle crossed the finish line before the rabbit got there.

So people say, "Slow and steady wins the race."

The Whale and the Sea Slug

Long ago, the whale was very proud, and he was always bragging, "No animal is greater than I." The sea slug heard this and laughed. This made the whale very angry, so he challenged the sea slug to a race.

The sea slug agreed, saying, "Certainly, but not today. In three days we will meet at the beech at Yura, and then we will race."

After this the sea slug gathered up all of his friends. He told them, "I just agreed to race the whale. Now, of course, I cannot win, so here is what we must do: each of us must go to a different beach around here. Since the whale can never tell us apart, each of you must pretend to be me. Then, when the whale arrives, you must call out, 'Are you just now getting here?' The whale will then think I have beaten him. If he wants to race to a different beach, the same thing will happen there." The other sea slugs all agreed, and so the went tumbling off through the sea to the different beaches. After three days had passed, the whale and the sea slug met at the beach at Yura. "All right," said the slug, "Let's race to the beach at Kohama." Then they both set off

The whale swam swiftly and powerfully, but when he got to Kohama he was surprised to hear, "Whale, Whale, are you just now getting here? You did not swim very fast this time. But perhaps we should race again. Let us race to the beach at Shimoda." So they both set off again.

The whale swam even more swiftly than before, but again, when he arrived, he was surprised to hear, "Whale, Whale, are you just now getting here? You did not swim very fast this time. But perhaps we should race again. Let us race to the beach at Mori." So again they both set off.

And so it went. At each beach that they swam to, the slug was always there first, and so, in the end, the whale was forced to admit that he was defeated.

have students who are reluctant to contribute, doing this individually first gives them something to contribute when working in a larger group.

7) **If appropriate, show how the most important differences would be incorporated into an academic paper or summary.** To do this, you might outline the contents of one or more possible papers on the board.

8) **If appropriate, have students write a short paper discussing the key similarities and differences.**

Variation

With more advanced students, give each student all the stories and have them do the activity individually; this gives more of a reading focus.

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Supporting and Evaluating Activity Comparing Unrelated Tales

Many college students (including native speakers), provide inadequate support for assertions that they make. This activity provides practice in supporting conclusions. It also provides practice in evaluating the importance of different points and in noticing that different issues may be more or less important in different contexts.

Do this activity after students have read or listened to a number of different stories.

Preparation

If students need some support to do the activity, prepare a partially filled in chart that gets them started. Otherwise, no preparation is needed.

In the Classroom

1. **List on the board the stories that students have read or listened to that you want them to work with for this activity.**
2. **Have students identify the most important quality (or qualities) in each story.** These qualities can be either positive or negative.
3. **Have them identify something in the story that supports this.** Depending on the stories and the level of the students, you might ask for several pieces of support.

Story	Important Quality	Support
Benizara & Kakezara *(Japanese Cinderella)*	ability to compose a traditional poem quickly	This was the test that the prince used to decide who to marry.
Cinderella (French)	beauty, small feet	
Strong Wind (Indian Cinderella)	honesty	The youngest sister's honesty what made Strong Wind choose her for a wife
The Princess and the Pea	sensitive skin	Feeling a pea through many mattresses was the proof the parents wanted that the girl was a real princess
The King's Fountain	courage	The man needed courage to go and tell the king he was wrong since the king might kill him.
The Turtle and the Rabbit	perseverance	
The Whale and the Sea Slug	craftiness	

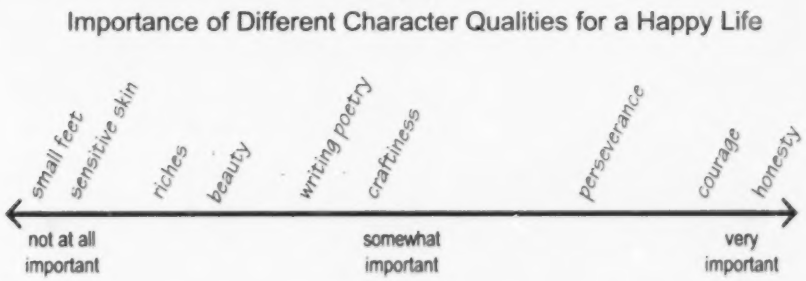
4. **In small groups, have students compare and discuss their answers.** Have them try to reach a consensus.

5. **First individually, and then in small groups, have students evaluate the importance of the different ideas.** Students can be asked to evaluate the importance of the ideas for a single context, or they can be asked to evaluate them for several different contexts. For example, *How important are these qualities for you? ...for a potential spouse? ...for a politician? ...for an actress?* etc.). Students can also be asked to evaluate and represent the importance of the ideas in a number of ways. Three possibilities are illustrated below:

Ranking: *Ranking items places them in their relative priority; it does not say how important or unimportant any item is independently; it only shows how important items are in relationship to the other items on the list.*

For Me	For My Wife	For a Politician
1) honesty	1) honesty	1) craftiness
2) courage	2) beauty	2) beauty
3) perseverance	3) courage	3) courage
4) ability to write poetry	4) perseverance	4) perseverance
5) craftiness	5) sensitive skin	5) ability to write poetry
6) beauty	6) ability to write poetry	6) honesty
7) sensitive skin	7) craftiness	7) sensitive skin
8) small feet	8) small feet	8) small feet

Continuum Line: *Placing items on a continuum line shows how important different items are independent of their relationship to each other.*



Grouping: *Placing items in chart provides an opportunity to organize and group without making precise evaluations.*

Qualities for an International Tour Guide			
might be negative	doesn't matter	somewhat important	very important
sensitive skin	writing poetry beauty small feet	honesty courage craftiness	perseverance

6. **Discuss evaluations as a class (including why people thought certain elements were important or not important) and/or have students write their reasons for their evaluations.**

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Evaluating/Summarizing Activity

Preparation

1. **Take a story and write about 15-20 summary statements.**
2. **Rank the importance of the strips** (most important, moderately important, relatively unimportant).
3. **If you are going to do the strip story, scramble the order of the sentences so students can cut them apart without getting the correct order.**

In the classroom

1. **Have students read or listen to the story.**
2. **Optional: have students cut apart the sentences and order as a strip story.**
3. **Individually or in small groups, have students rank the importance of each strip:** 1 = most important (key element of story), 2 = moderately important, 3 = relatively unimportant (could be changed and it wouldn't really alter the story). You may choose to tell students how many items should be in each group. (Sometimes this makes things easier since it tells them what to shoot for, but other times it makes them harder because they rate one or two strips differently than you did and then have to struggle with figuring out which one instead of just being done.)

Strips for Salem and the Nail
Many people came to look.
Salem bought a new shop.
Abraham took Salem to the judge.
He decided to sell his house, except for one nail.
Abraham bought Salem's house.
Abraham complained that the donkey smelled bad.
Salem hung an empty bag on the nail.
Salem's shop burned in a fire.
Salem hung an old coat on the nail.
People went away shaking their heads
Salem bought his old house at half price.
Salem hung a dead donkey on the nail.
Abraham argued about the price.
Abraham could not live in the house.

Reordered strips with importance marked
2 Salem's shop burned in a fire.
1 He decided to sell his house, except for one nail.
3 Many people came to look.
3 People went away shaking their heads
3 Abraham argued about the price.
1 Abraham bought Salem's house.
3 Salem hung an empty bag on the nail.
3 Salem hung an old coat on the nail.
1 Salem hung a dead donkey on the nail.
3 Abraham complained that the donkey smelled bad.
3 Abraham took Salem to the judge.
1 Abraham could not live in the house.
1 Salem bought his old house at half price.
2 Salem bought a new shop.

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4. **Review as class and discuss any differences in opinion about the importance of different strips.** In teaching students to do this type of evaluation, it is important for you to think aloud whenever decisions are unclear; show students how you got to your conclusion rather than just telling them your conclusion. (E.g., *I decided Salem's buying a new shop was not one of the most important sentences because if we took it out, we still would have a story about his tricking Abraham into buying a house he couldn't live in and then making money on the deal. But I decided it wasn't one of the least important sentences because leaving it out would take away Salem's reason for doing what he did. For example, if he had done this trick to save his dying mother, we would feel very differently about him; that would make this a fairly different story.*)

5. **Show how including/excluding different levels gives different degrees of summarization.** (E.g., for the shortest summary, include only the #1 strips, etc.) You could write out (or show on the overhead) the different versions of the summary, or you could just read the different versions.

Variation

For more advanced students, don't provide the summary statements. After telling the story, have them work in groups of three to write as many single sentence statements about the story as they can remember. Then have them rank their own sentences and produce summaries with different degrees of detail. You may then want to compare the summaries produced by different groups to see how similar or different they are.

Following Stories with Questions that Promote Inferencing

Academic work often requires students to draw conclusions that are not directly stated. Stories always have elements that are not directly stated, and comparing different versions of a story draws attention to some of the differences in values and assumptions between the different versions.

Inferencing is not something that can be taught once so that students then know it; it is rather something that must be repeatedly shown and that students will gradually get. Regularly raise questions that invite students to draw inferences, and think aloud when they need help. For example:

Based on the different qualities that were emphasized in these three Cinderella stories (beauty, honesty, creating poetry), what attitudes might you expect toward women in these societies?

Why do you think she didn't tell her father what her sisters had done? What might be possible expectations in their culture that would have caused her not to do so?

The Russian version of this story almost always has a beggar. The French version usually has a few soldiers. Why might this difference exist?

By regularly briefly raising such questions, you can alert students to the fact that there is information in the text that isn't directly stated and give them practice in finding this information.

Source for the Material in this Paper

The ideas in this paper are adapted from *Using Folk Tales*, a book that I am currently completing for Cambridge's Handbooks for Language Teachers series. The book should be released in 1998.